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NOTICES OF NEW BOOKS.

On Causation, with a Chapter on Belief. By CHARLES A. MERCIER. London, Longmans, Green, and Company, 1916.—pp. xii, 228.

This book is a product of militant common-sense; and common-sense, in logic as in fiction, has little use for the neutral grays of everyday life; it likes its villains to be real angels of darkness. The fiend in human form who dominates this story is the logician. With a stupidity which quite achieves the level of malice, the logician since the days of Mill has involved every phase of causation in chaos and dark night, until in despair the author had to let in the light himself. The logician can hardly be expected to admit that this portrait is a true likeness, but if he is blessed with a sense of humor, he may be content to leave his revenge to nemesis. Perhaps he will be satisfied when he finds the light-bringer deriving cause from the fact that we cannot imagine a change to be 'produced' without action upon the thing changed (p. 43). While he is struggling to set the bounds to what we can imagine, the logician will perhaps be puzzled to imagine the difference between producing a change and causing one.

The strength of the book lies in the fact that the author conceives the problem of causation in the light of a rather definite situation. As a physician he has been keenly conscious of the ambiguity of such phrases as 'causes of death,' 'causes of insanity,' and the serious practical difficulties which the physician faces in reporting upon such 'causes' or in testifying before the courts in cases involving criminal or other responsibility. The value of the book, both to the physician and the logician, would have been enhanced if the chapter on "Causes of Death, Causes of Insanity" had been made more explicitly the center of the discussion rather than a corollary to a theory of causation which professes to be universal. The author does not perceive that the difficulties which he finds in the logicians' treatment of cause arise in the main from their effort to discuss this concept as if it had a single meaning applicable to all situations. The fact is that the uses of causation are so various that any single definition is sure to result in confusion somewhere.

The main device which the author uses to clarify 'cause' is a sharpening of the distinctions between such terms as effect and result, agent, cause, condition, and reason. Of these distinctions the one which he uses most is that between condition as a passive state and cause as an activity. Unfortunately the distinction between activity and passivity is not clearer than that which he intends to clarify by it. He says, for example, that it would be inaccurate to say that the earth causes a stone to fall, but perfectly accurate to say that an action of the earth (its power of attraction) causes the stone to fall (p. 56). The earth is an agent and gravity is an action, though the distance between the earth and the stone is a passive state (p. 57). But surely, of the three factors which

the physicist would distinguish here, time, distance, and mass, it is purely arbitrary to say that one is more active or more passive than another. And where is the appropriateness of calling the earth's attraction (which is really nothing but a name) an action? Are we to think of the earth as pulling the stone, like a man reeling in a fish? We know, of course, that anything which can intelligibly be called the pull of gravity is exactly the same (the distance between the earth and the stone being the same) whether the stone falls or not. In other words, it is a permanent condition and is perfectly passive so long as the stone is not released.

The truth is that whether any given factor is said to be active or passive depends mainly upon the purpose of the observer. Active and passive are categories primarily of human conduct, attitudes of body or mind in behavior, which are carried over into our interpretation of events not belonging to conduct. While it is doubtful whether there is anything like consistency in our usage, it appears in general that any factor is thought of as active when it is regarded as the changing or changeable factor in a complex of conditions and causes. Dr. Mercier considers it wrong to speak of occupation as a cause of disease, occupation being a passive condition and not an action. Does this mean more than that a physician commonly finds it impossible to change his patient's occupation, particularly since the patient does not usually come to the doctor until his occupation has done the damage? If a legislator were urging the passage of a bill requiring factories to install fans to carry away the dust from brass-polishing wheels, why should anyone object to saying that he wished to remove a cause of tuberculosis? Dr. Mercier fully recognizes that among the several causes of any event we can distinguish *the* cause only by reference to purpose. He might have noticed the same fact about the distinction between active and passive. If he had, he would have perceived that he must go still farther to find the means of clarifying cause and effect.

The most definitely useful chapter in the book is the restatement of the methods of determining causal relation. One may cheerfully admit that the writers of text-books on logic have been far too content to repeat Mill's canons, and moreover to repeat them as if they were descriptive of actual procedure instead of forms for testing validity, which is the way in which Mill seems mainly to have regarded them. Dr. Mercier's list of nine methods is suggestive, though it is formed on no very definite principle, includes much that has no more reference to cause than to other relations, and is certainly less novel than the author imagines. In point of theory, Dr. Mercier's list of methods suffers from the most serious defect of Mill's methods: He does not take account of the fact that any of the methods is only a way of choosing between the members of a disjunction and therefore has to assume that the disjunction is made before the method is applied. It is the vice of commonsense to suppose that nature presents itself with things and their actions duly labeled for our selection.

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